



New Haven Democracy Fund

"To ensure that all the citizens of New Haven have a fair and meaningful opportunity to participate in the election of mayor."
New Haven Code of General Ordinances, Chapter 2, Article XI, §2-821 • Established in 2007 • democracyfund3newhaven.net



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Testimony of Alyson Heimer
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In support of H.B. No. 6749 AN ACT CONCERNING THE EXPANSION OF PUBLIC FINANCING OF MUNICIPAL CAMPAIGNS

I want to thank Chairman Cassano, Chairman Jutila, and members of the Committee, for allowing me the opportunity to testify today. My name is Alyson Heimer; I am the Administrator of the Democracy Fund in New Haven. I am here to testify in support of H.B. 6749. This act would extend the public financing pilot program allowing municipalities to not just opt into such a program, but also create their own program that works best in their city or town. The State Elections and Enforcement Commission (SEEC) will be on hand to help guide municipal bodies through the process.

New Haven Proudly Uses Public Financing For Mayoral Races

Presently New Haven is the only city in Connecticut that has such a program. The Democracy Fund (the Fund) allows candidates to choose if they want to use the program, and in the past 7 years we have had a majority of candidates (3 in 4) participate. The Fund provides a grant, similar to the grant offered through the state's Citizen's Election Program (CEP) to state-level races. The Fund combines the grant with matching funds for small donations (up to \$25). The program has worked exceedingly well. In 2013 there was a seven way race for mayor and four candidates participated and abided by the rules of the Fund. The Fund eased the fundraising burden for candidates, allowing them to spend more time talking about the issues that matter to them and the community. The process also enabled all candidates to file electronically, reducing the paperwork burden on treasurers and the City/Town Clerk. Lastly, the candidates who chose to participate in the Fund were able to take advantage of low dollar donors because of the matching fund. A donation of \$25 from a registered New Haven voter would become \$75 with the matching funds. Matching funds helped give contributors a sense that even though their small donation was all they could afford, that it helped the candidate of their choice three times as much. This helps empower people who may not have contributed otherwise. The push by candidates for low dollar donations allowed more people to have buy in on a campaign. The Fund rules also create a donation maximum to prevent the perception that a candidate who became mayor would be beholden to any one donor or group.

Other Municipalities Are Interested

This bill would allow additional town to create programs like the Democracy Fund. Middletown, Bridgeport and Hartford have expressed interest in the past. These towns have not done so because the SEEC has been turning interested parties away since 2009, when they believe the pilot program ended. This bill would allow these cities to begin the process of creating their own programs. Because no

other substantive changes are being requested at this time three very important components of statute remain: The statute already ensures that the SEEC will act as a resource to help guide towns or cities in the process. The proposed bill does not change the requirement that city and town counsels approve the creation of these programs. Lastly, the bill maintains provisions that allow candidates to opt in and out of participation freely. These provisions ensure that communities and candidates have buy in on public financing.

No Defined Term

One change to this bill before it is adopted may be necessary. The language of the statute is ambiguous and the SEEC's legal team indicated that they are unclear if the program is past term or not. Bottom line, it needs to be clear in any legislation what the term of the pilot program is, if any deadlines or term are created for both the SEEC and interested municipalities. According to some at the SEEC, the program ended in 2009, if this is the case the bill needs to include a provision that extend the term. If there is indeed no term indicated in the statute, then this bill should reflect the intent of this committee to either impose a term limit on participation in the pilot program, or not. I would request that *the program term should be open ended to allow for full participation*. This is needed because one of the requirements of the statute is that town counsel bodies approve the use of this type of program. This approval will take different amounts of time in each town and towns should be given as much time as they need to create programs that work for them.

No Fiscal Note

The original legislation that was passed creating the first pilot program had no fiscal note. This bill should also have no cost to the state. The public financing funding would come from the municipalities, but raised in a way that these towns deem fit. Enabling cities and towns to control their own budget and fund this program in their own way is very important for it's success.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of H.B. No. 6749. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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